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SUBJECT: LIBERIA - PRESIDENT SIRLEAF WILL SEEK SECOND TERM

REF: 09 MONROVIA 487; 09 MONROVIA 549

CLASSIFIED BY: Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Ambassador, State, AF;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf announced her intention to run for re-election at the conclusion of her annual message to the National Legislature. Sirleaf was widely criticized for making a campaign announcement at a governmental event and her high-profile announcement is a direct challenge to the recommendations of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission that she be banned from politics for thirty years and proof that she sees herself as the people's candidate. In her speech, Sirleaf recommended a way forward for dealing with the controversial TRC proposals by ensuring that they are in line with Liberia's laws and constitutions, and moving forward on less controversial recommendations. Former warlord Prince Johnson, listed in the TRC report for prosecution, announced his presidential candidacy on the same day, but was overshadowed by Sirleaf. These announcements, well in advance of the October 2011 election, leave presidential contenders plenty of time to reconcile their candidacy with the TRC's proposals. END SUMMARY.

SIRLEAF ANNOUNCES INTENT TO SEEK RE-ELECTION IN LEGISLATIVE ADDRESS

12. (C) Referring to herself as a "formidable candidate," Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf announced her intention to run for re-election in 2011 at the conclusion of her January 25 annual message to the National Legislature. The announcement comes despite Sirleaf's promise during the 2005 electoral campaign not to seek a second term. The timing of the president's announcement was unexpected and Sirleaf confidants told Ambassador after the speech that the re-election plan was not part of her speech's final text and they were unaware of the president's intention to make the announcement now. Regardless, the announcement was the high point of the president's speech and she received a standing ovation from the majority of legislators present.

WHAT PROMPTED THE ANNOUNCEMENT AT SUCH A HIGH-PROFILE EVENT?

13. (C) After the June 2009 publication of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's draft report listing Sirleaf among those to be excluded from holding public office for 30 years (Ref A), the president has backpedaled from her 2005 one-term pledge and engaged in campaign-like stumping at public events. She also refuted the TRC's alleged version of her relationship with former President Charles Taylor during the 1990s in her July 26 Independence Day speech (Ref B). Sirleaf has privately intimated to her advisors and Ambassador that the TRC's decision to list her was a politicized decision meant to hold her to her one-term pledge. This challenge from the TRC steeled her decision to run for re-election.

¶4. (U) There is no constitutional restraint to Sirleaf seeking re-election and Sirleaf stressed to legislators that Liberians must "make a conscious national determination to move ahead cautiously and strategically in the implementation of the [TRC's] recommendations." In her speech, the president suggested that parts of the TRC's recommendations be put forward to the still unconfirmed members of the Independent National Human Rights Commission (INHRC), who are tasked with ensuring implementation of the report's proposals. She also recommended that the act creating the INHRC be amended to allow the Ministry of Justice to work with the INHRC in determining which TRC recommendations are enforceable under Liberia's laws and constitution.

CRITICISM OF ANNOUNCEMENT VENUE

¶5. (SBU) Sirleaf was later publicly criticized by opposition party leaders for using the occasion of an annual governmental address to announce her re-election run rather than at an event coordinated with her Unity Party. Press reports quoted Liberty Party leader Charles Brumskine as troubled by Sirleaf's inability to discern a constitutionally required address from a "campaign affair."

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FORMER WARLORD ENTERS THE FRAY

¶6. (C) Also on January 25, former Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia faction leader Prince Johnson, who now serves as an independent senator from Nimba County, announced his candidacy for the presidency with Grand Cape Mount County Senator Abel Massallay as his running mate. Johnson is one of eight major combatant leaders recommended for prosecution for gross human rights violations in the TRC report; he has consistently professed his innocence. Massallay is a former confidant of Charles Taylor and a member of Taylor's National Patriotic Party. The duo has little chance of success given their questionable activities during Liberia's civil war, but their decision to run is likely aimed at gaining early support among Taylor's remaining supporters.

COMMENT:

¶7. (C) Sirleaf's announcement fully overshadowed the contents of her annual address and preempted any criticisms of her recited list of accomplishments and governmental plan of action in the near term. Advanced warning of her candidacy, well in advance of the presidential election scheduled for October 2011, plus the call for the involvement of the Ministry of Justice (led by many Sirleaf devotees) in the INHRC's affairs gives Sirleaf's supporters plenty of time to ensure that her candidacy is legal and constitutional no matter what the TRC recommends. Further Embassy reporting will follow on public reaction to Sirleaf's announcement and other details of her annual message.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD